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Pattern of conferences

Career development in language services

Reducing excessive vacancy rates at some duty stations: the possibility of introducing a system of managed assignments

Report of the Secretary-General

Addendum

Summary

A recent review of vacancy rates at all duty stations shows that by and large the language services at the United Nations Office at Vienna and in the regional commissions experience excessive vacancy rates. Direct assignment of newly recruited staff to those duty stations and calls for experienced staff at Headquarters to volunteer for assignments of several years in the field have not proven very effective in resolving this problem. Radical measures, such as establishing a system of managed assignments, may not be well-suited to the nature and the magnitude of the issue. Making assignments away from Headquarters more attractive, essentially through enhanced career prospects, is one alternative that the Office of Human Resources Management and the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services are reviewing in some depth.

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1. By paragraph 33 of its resolution 53/208 A of 18 December 1998, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to submit to it at its fifty-fourth session, through the Committee on Conferences and the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions, a report on possible measures to alleviate the excessive vacancy rates in language services at some duty stations and ensure the required quality of conference services Secretariat-wide.

2. In that connection, it will be recalled that at its substantive session held in 1998, the Committee on Conferences had requested the Secretary-General to submit to the General Assembly at its fifty-fourth session, through the Committee on Conferences, a report on the possibility of introducing a system of managed assignments based on non-monetary incentives, which would alleviate the excessive vacancy rates in language services at some duty stations and ensure the required quality of conference services Secretariat-wide. The present report is submitted pursuant to these two requests.

3. In view of the close relationship between the subject of the present report and the information already provided with regard to mobility between duty stations in the report on career development in language services submitted to the General Assembly at its resumed fifty-third session (A/53/919, paras. 19–23), the present report is issued as an addendum to that document.

4. A review of vacancy rates at all four United Nations conference centres and the regional commissions as at 31 March 1999 has been carried out. Its outcome is summarized in table 1.

5. As already noted in previous instances, the vacancy rates at Headquarters and at the United Nations Office at Geneva are comparable to, and in some cases better than, the overall rate recorded for the entire Secretariat, namely slightly in excess of 10 per cent for 1998 (see A/54/6 (Part one) (i)). On the other hand, with the exception of the United Nations Office at Nairobi and the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, significantly higher rates are recorded at duty stations with smaller language units. A breakdown of vacancies at those duty stations appears in table 2.

6. In Nairobi, the fact that out of 19 reviser/translator posts, 15 are extrabudgetary posts administered directly by the United Nations Office at Nairobi under the special delegation of authority given to the United Nations Environment Programme no doubt explains a deviation from the pattern of high vacancy rates at duty stations with smaller language services. To remedy the situation at those duty stations, a number of measures have been taken over the years, as outlined in the report on career development, such as direct assignment of junior translators to offices away from Headquarters after their recruitment and the completion of their training in New York and calls for volunteers in the Headquarters translation services for temporary assignments of two or three years at less-sought-after duty stations. However, it must be recognized that such measures have not been fully effective.

Table 1
Vacancy rates in language services (Professional posts only) (as at 31 March 1999)

Duty station language service	*Number of vacancies number of posts*	*Vacancy rate (percentage)*
Headquarters		
Translation and editorial	32/360	8 9
Interpretation	5/119	4 2
Verbatim reporting	0/53	0
Copy preparation	0/18	0
United Nations Office at Geneva		
Translation and editorial	21/170	12 2
Interpretation	10/84	11 9
United Nations Office at Vienna		
Translation and editorial	12/52	23 1
Interpretation	3/17	17 6
United Nations Office at Nairobi		
Translation and editorial	0/19	0
Economic Commission for Africa		
Translation and editorial	5/15	33
Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific		
Translation and editorial	2/20	10
Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean		
Translation and editorial	4/10	40
Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia		
Translation and editorial	5/9	55 5

7. High vacancy rates in language services at duty stations other than New York and Geneva have been a lingering problem. In the face of the continuing difficulties encountered in filling those vacancies through reliance on the availability of volunteers for limited periods of service

at those duty stations, it was logical to consider the possibility of a stricter implementation of staff regulation 1.2 (c), which provides that "staff members are subject to the authority of the Secretary-General and to assignment by him to any of the activities or offices of the United Nations". Given the disproportion between the number of vacant posts to fill in the translation and editorial units at those duty stations (28 as at 31 March 1999) and in the Interpretation Section at the United Nations Office at Vienna on the one hand (see table 2), and the numbers of translators and editors posted at Headquarters and the United Nations Office at Geneva (530 as at 31 March 1999) and of interpreters posted in those two offices (203) on the other hand (see table 1), it was important to develop objective and transparent criteria under which staff would be subjected to mandatory reassignment. Owing to the lack of such criteria, attempts at enforcing such a system in New York in the early 1970s were perceived by the staff concerned as discriminatory and caused a number of resignations, which disrupted the operation of some services at Headquarters.

Table 2
Vacancies, by level, in language services at duty stations other than New York and Geneva (as at 31 March 1999)

	Level				
Duty station language service	*P-5*	*P-4*	*P-3*	*P-2*	*Total*
United Nations Office at Vienna					
Translation and editorial	1	5	6	–	12
Interpretation	–	–	3	–	3
United Nations Office at Nairobi					
Translation and editorial	–	–	–	–	–
Economic Commission for Africa					
Translation and editorial	–	2	3	–	5
Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific					
Translation and editorial	–	–	2	–	2
Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean					
Translation and editorial	–	2	1	1	4
Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia					
Translation and editorial	–	3	2	–	5
Total	**1**	**12**	**17**	**1**	**31**

8. With the adoption of General Assembly resolution 51/226 of 3 April 1997, the practice of mandatory assignment of staff members for service at some duty stations was significantly curtailed, as the Assembly had requested the Secretary-General "to announce all vacancies so as to give equal opportunity to all qualified staff and to encourage mobility, *it being understood that the discretionary power of the Secretary-General of appointment and promotion outside the established procedures should be limited to his Executive Office and the under-secretary-general and assistant secretary-general levels, as well as special envoys at all levels*" (emphasis added). While managers continued to draw the attention of their staff to vacancy announcements for posts away from Headquarters and encouraged suitable potential candidates to apply, the idea of mandatory reassignment without prior circulation of a vacancy announcement was abandoned.

9. Another alternative that has been the subject of discussions within the Secretariat is the possibility of establishing a system of rotation or managed assignments whereby at some point in their careers, all language staff at Headquarters, or conceivably at Headquarters and the United Nations Office at Geneva, would, without exception, be required to effect a tour of duty at one of the other duty stations. However, a number of constraints must be taken into account before launching such a system. One major consideration is certainly the very high price in terms of travel and installation costs of such a large-scale rotation scheme, which is all the more difficult to accept given that, contrary to what may be the case for some other professional groups, experience in the field does not prepare language staff for more demanding assignments later on at Headquarters. The greater diversity of the demands placed on translators, editors and interpreters at Headquarters, and the greater capacity there, within large services, for extended in-service training and quality control, are indeed essential factors for the improvement of the qualifications of language staff.

10. Another consideration, already referred to in paragraph 7 above, is the considerable imbalance between demand, in terms of a limited number of vacancies to fill at duty stations other than New York and Geneva, and supply, in terms of the vast pool of language staff posted at those two offices. Irrespective of costs, the disruption and the administrative work stemming from large-scale periodic assignments and reassignments must be measured in relation to the scope of the problem to be addressed.

11. In this context, the ongoing discussions between the Office of Human Resources Management and the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference

Services on the subject of the vacancy situation at duty stations away from Headquarters have focused less on the need to establish a new system, such as a managed assignment system, than on ways and means to make assignments at those duty stations more attractive, thus increasing the number of volunteers. One way is taking into greater account the mobility factor in the promotion process. As indicated in paragraph 9 above, experience in the field does not in itself increase the linguistic qualifications of language staff, but the willingness to accept assignments away from Headquarters at the cost of possible personal inconvenience denotes a sense of commitment to the goals of the Organization, which deserves recognition. In particular, it would be helpful to identify promising translators with a couple of years of experience at Headquarters who would be prepared to accept two-year assignments at one of the less-sought-after duty stations on the assurance that (a) they would be reintegrated automatically in their parent service after two years and (b) when posts at a higher level became available in that service after their return, special consideration would be given to their applications on account of their record of mobility. While such an approach appears practical a priori, the modalities for its implementation must be carefully weighed in order to satisfy the need to uphold the principle that promotions should be granted to the staff members who are the most competent and capable of performing satisfactorily at the higher level. Care should also be taken to avoid firm individual commitments that would jeopardize the integrity of the promotion process as it is currently defined by the Staff Rules. These modalities will be the subject of further discussions between the Office of Human Resources Management and the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services in the context of human resources management reform.